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Challenges for children's participation: child activism for ending child marriage

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Abstract

There is ever-increasing global and local attention to children's participation rights. As activities have proliferated, so have concerns about children's participation having an impact on decision-making. This article looks to what can be learned conceptually and practically from children's activism, which have examples where children have actively changed decisions in their communities. This article examines one such example, where groups of children in Bangladesh stopped the illegal marriages of children. Research was undertaken with two Child Forums, involving 36 child activists. Further interviews were undertaken with girls whose marriages had been stopped and adults who had key roles in the child activism, such as local police officers and civil servants. The analysis finds that: (1) the legal context was critical to the child activists' success, not because parents were arrested but because children could mobilise local officials; (2) the activism was collective rather than individualistic, supported by a nexus of relationships; (3) successes depended on children's persistent and urgent activity, in order to mobilise other people's attention and actions. The article concludes that the children's participation field should attend to the conceptual lessons from activism and its practical contributions in: recognising the critical importance of the 'shadow of the law'; building children's political capital, and supporting the spaces and time for children to mobilise alongside educational demands.

Highlights

- The 'shadow of the law' helped child activists mobilise legal officials to intervene in potential child marriages.
- Child activism was not an isolated, individualistic activity; it relied on relationships having already been established between supportive peer groups, between children and local officials, and facilitating adults.

¹ The article uses the term 'children' to refer to children under the age of 18. The international campaign to end child marriage relates to children under the age of 18 (see https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/EndingChildMarriage_Brochure_English-Web-Final.pdf [Accessed 25.4.19]).

- Child activists were successful because they had the expertise to access conclusive administrative information to persuade powerful adults to act.
- Child activists were willing and able to act urgently, taking the initiative to find such information and bring it to the attention of local officials.
- Child activism should become a conceptual and practical challenge to the children's participation field, learning from the associated field of youth activism.

Keywords

Children; children's rights; participation; activism; child marriage.

1. Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed ever-increasing global and local attention to children's participation rights, supported and promoted by an ideational shift embodied by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)². It is the most ratified of international human rights conventions, with only the USA currently not having ratified it. With ratification, States Parties are obligated to implement the rights in their national contexts. Despite these legal requirements, and ensuing developments in law, policy and practice, children's participation rights are often not realised in practice: there are considerable concerns about tokenism and a failure to influence decision-making (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Lundy, 2018). Thus, it is particularly illuminating to consider examples where children's participation seems to transcend such concerns. What can we learn from these 'successful' examples of children's participation?

This article examines one such example of child activism in Bangladesh, where organised groups of children took direct action to stop child marriage locally³. The children are members of local Child Forums, initiated and supported by World Vision Bangladesh (a non-governmental organisation (NGO)). The Forums raise awareness on children's rights with a focus on stopping child marriage. The children's activism was acclaimed by the NGO – over 15 marriages stopped was reported – and by the Bangladeshi media⁴. This article is based on research of two of these local Child Forums, with 36 child activists, as well as girls whose

² In this article, the abbreviation UNCRC is used for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The abbreviation UNO is used for Upazila Nirbahi Officers, who are mid-level civil service officers in Bangladesh.

³ Such child activism to stop child marriage can be found elsewhere in Bangladesh, as well as in different countries. For example see Bandyopadhyay (2015).

⁴ The specificities of this are not cited here, to protect the anonymity of the Forum.

marriages had been stopped and key adults related to the children's activism (such as local police officers and civil servants). The article concentrates on the factors that contributed to the children's activism successfully stopping a child's marriage.

The article uses these findings to consider the practical and conceptual lessons for children's participation more generally, requiring adults to challenge and change their own ideas about where and when children should be. The article begins by basing itself in the current debates in children's participation literature, before describing the underlying research study and providing a summary of a typical 'action'. The article then draws out three themes from the findings that were essential elements for the children's activism to be successful. The article concludes with suggested lessons for the participation and human rights field.

2. Background and Theory

The UNCRC itself does not use the word participation in Article 12 but the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child describes participation in its General Comment on Article 12(1) (2009):

This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (p. 3)

The General Comment's description contrasts with the notion of participation as merely taking part in or being present at activities; it underlines children and young people's entitlement to participate in decision-making processes on issues that impact on their lives and for their views to have 'due weight' in the decisions (Tisdall, 2015).⁵ Children and young people can participate as individuals, but also collectively, where groups of children and young people seek to influence decision-making and bring about change (Burke, 2010). While Article 12 is recognised as a General Principle of the UNCRC, there are other key participation rights within the Convention, including the freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), protection of privacy (Article 16) and access to information (Article 17). With these rights, the UNCRC has galvanised attention to children and young people's participation, resulting in considerable activity – from legislative and other policy changes, to establishing participation forums, to a

⁵ The full text of Article 12(1) is: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

wealth of projects at all levels from local to international (Lundy, 2007; Tisdall and McMellon, forthcoming).

Following from this proliferation of activities has come increasing critical consideration of their effectiveness (e.g. see Lundy, 2018; Malone and Hartung, 2010; Tisdall and McMellon, forthcoming). Common challenges have been identified, such as participation rights being framed in law but not delivered in practice. Poor accountability mechanisms result in children not being able to complain nor claim their participation rights. With increased children's participation activities have come concerns that adults and adult systems can be controlling rather than emancipatory, extracting children's views but having little to no commitment to considering them seriously. Children are often invited into consultations where their opinions can make little difference, are treated in a tokenistic way, or side-lined if they come against competing (adult) interests. Some children are regularly invited to participate, while others have few opportunities, leading to widespread concerns that only socio-economically elite children are involved, that children are unrepresentative of their peers, and that some children are consistently excluded. These very familiar challenges are found across seemingly very different socio-economic and cultural contexts and can be found in the literature for decades.

Of interest, then, are examples of children's participation that seem to meet some or all of these challenges. A connecting factor across many of these examples are different relations between adult decision-makers and children: where children are recognised as having particular expertise and knowledge, and adults have the commitment and initiative to acknowledge and incorporate these (Shier, 2015; Houghton, 2018; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019; Meekson and Wan, 2019). Such examples create more respectful, dialogic spaces and conduits between children and adult decision-makers, with demonstrable changes in decisions.

Child activism potentially goes even further (see Mayekiso and Gwandure, 2011; Nolas et al., 2016). If the above activities are still largely initiated and structured by adults, what about activities that seem more generated by children themselves, who take action on their own initiative to influence change? There is growing recognition of child activism resulting in substantial changes in decision-making and their communities (e.g. Paul, 2018). The term activism is used here deliberately, to parallel the discussion of activism in the youth literature, which assumes that young people self-generate these activities without requiring directed adult support (Bosco, 2010; Pitti, 2018). With the term is not often used in the children's participation literature – and indeed, too proactive for some organisations to feel comfortable using it – we do so here as a provocation to the norms of children's participation.

Child activism is not the only term which can provide such a provocation. Gradually, the English-language field is learning from concepts well-developed in Latin America and Spanish-language literature, on child protagonism (e.g. Jupp Kina, 2012; Larkins et al., 2015).

The concept recognises that children play an active role in their societies and have the capabilities to suggest and instigate change (see Liebel, 2007). Further, the concept is linked to ideas of participative democracy and active citizenship (see Liebel, 2007; Nuggehalli, 2014), which have particular resonance in the history of many Latin America countries (Rizzini, 2011). Child activism thus has similarities to child protagonism, in emphasising the active roles of children to change their societies. Child activism does not necessarily share child protagonism's emphasis on democracy and citizenship, which come from a particular history and merit conceptual consideration in themselves (see for example Cockburn 2013 and Lister 2007 on children's citizenship). Thus, while seeking to learn from such alternatives, this article continues with the concept of child activism as a potentially unsettling concept for the children's participation field that could be applied even more widely than child protagonism to places without an emphasis on democracy and citizenship.

The article focuses on child activism, so child marriage is the context rather than the focus. Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years (Wodon et al., 2017). Extensive research on child marriage evidences its roots in gender inequalities, poverty, insecurity and lower levels of education (Kalamar et al., 2016) and, in most cases, places girls at higher risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and social isolation (Efervbra et al., 2017). Across the world, it is estimated that 15 million girls marry each year before reaching 18 years of age and more than 700 million women and girls alive today were married before they turned 18 (UNICEF, 2014). Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with 52 percent of girls married by the age 18 (Wodon et al., 2017). Concerted campaigning has now made child marriage a global human rights priority⁶. At least partially in response, Bangladesh now has the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 prohibiting a marriage where either or both contracting parties are minors (for males, under the age of 21; for girls, under the age of 18). There is an exception, which must follow court and other procedures, should it be in the best interests of the underage girl. Child activism in Bangladesh was thus in the context of most child marriages being illegal.

The research discussed here sought to learn from a particular example of children's activism: when children themselves conduct activities to take direct action, in small groups, to stop a potential child marriage.

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/ChildMarriage.aspx> [Accessed 25.4.19] We recognise that the international campaign to end child marriage has grown rapidly over recent decades, along with a critique in development studies about its implementation (e.g. Bessa 2018). We do not address it in the article, given the focus on children's activism.

3. Methods

The research study aimed to explore the claims, practices, and outcomes of child activism in Bangladesh from the perspectives of the child activists, (potential) child brides and community members. The project's research questions were: How do children become child activists? What are the longitudinal trajectories and impacts of those involved in the activism? What were the necessary factors and contexts for the child activism to be successful in stopping child marriage? This article predominantly addresses findings in relation to this third research question.

As an exploratory study, the methods were predominantly qualitative. This allowed for flexibility to consider participants' own understandings, perceptions about the processes and outcomes, and what had supported or hindered child activism (see Edwards, 2001). In addition, each child activist was invited to complete a self-report questionnaire, primarily to gain individualised information systematically (such as current age, the length of time and extent of involvement in the Child Forum).

Selecting research sites and participants are critical considerations for any research design (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014). To address the research questions, we sought sites where children had been active to stop child marriage recently (that is, in the last 12 months) and reportedly stopping marriages several times. We sought sites in both rural and urban contexts, as we anticipated that distances for children to travel might have different impacts on their activism (in fact, this did not appear to be a distinguishing feature in the analysis). With a wide range of sites to choose from, practical considerations such as the support of local organisations and potential participants' willingness to contribute contributed to the selection of two geographical areas. The study focused on the work of local Child Forums supported by World Vision Bangladesh, in two geographical areas (one urban and one rural). We then recruited child participants, through the local offices of World Vision Bangladesh, with purposive sampling (Beitin, 2012; Bryman, 2012). We asked for potential participants to be approached, because of their membership in their local Child Forum and active engagement in actions to stop child marriage. In total, 36 child activists participated in the initial focus groups, 21 of whom identified as girls and 15 of whom identified as boys. The children were between the ages of 13 and 17, evenly spread across these ages. The recruitment method means the research likely involved children more enthusiastic about their participation: i.e. it did not include children who had stopped their involvement with the Child Forums or chose not to participate in the research. Further, the children were supported by and recruited from an organisation, meaning that children who were similarly active but without such support were not included. This was partially addressed, as children recounted experiences before they had

joined the Child Forum. However, both these aspects have potential implications for the analysis and findings and lead to further research agendas.

We initially met the child activists in groups, two different groups in the rural area and one group in the urban areas. The groups were mixed gender, as this is how the groups regularly met and conducted meetings. The group sessions were divided into three activities: initial introductions and 'ice-breakers', a self-report questionnaire with eight questions, and in-depth discussions with the participants. As stated above, the self-report questionnaire sought more individualised information. The in-depth discussions took the form of focus groups, to benefit from the group exchange and discussion between children who had worked together on these issues (Morgan, 2012). Methods included visualisations, using large sheets of paper to track collectively the processes of child activism to stop child marriage (see, for example, Percy-Smith and Dalrymple, 2018 for use of 'journeys'). The groups were extremely lively and could have extended far beyond the 2 hours allocated, with the child activists very engaged in providing their views.

Further, six girls whose child marriages had been stopped by the Child Forum's child activism were then interviewed, supported within their familiar community centres. Semi-structured, individual interviews were the proposed method, to facilitate in-depth and interactive exchange on a potentially sensitive issue (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Beitin 2012). Four girls were interviewed one-to-one, while another two girls were interviewed together at their request. While highly informative, it needs to be acknowledged that these girls currently felt they were in a positive position, in relation to child marriage. Other access methods would be needed to track girls for whom the marriages, in the end, had not been stopped.

From the fieldwork with children, adults were identified who had key roles in the child activism and we sought to interview them. This resulted in semi-structured interviews with nine adults: five Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNO), who are mid-level civil service officers; the chief executive and a Women Development Officer of an Upazila (sub-district); the chairman of a Union Parisad (the smallest unit of local government); and two local police officers. These adults were mandated to take the necessary measures and legal actions to stop child marriages upon receiving written or verbal reports. In addition, interviews were held with two parents of the child brides whose marriages were stopped. Again, while we were able to interview these parents, our access was less than had been originally planned; there is very likely a bias that we were speaking with parents who were fairly positive about the child activism and the current situation for their daughters. Nonetheless, their contributions juxtaposed with other data were illuminating.

In order to anticipate and address ethical issues, this research followed ethical research guidelines to ensure the safety, rights, dignity and well-being of the participants

(Morrow, 2009). Initial ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. An extensive range of ethical issues were considered, from inclusive access procedures to how to construct the fieldwork instruments sensitively, which are detailed in the ethical protocol. Three issues are of particular note. First, in order to ensure that participation was voluntary and informed, the research team provided information about the study to the participants, which was delivered in Bengali, the local language. Participants then provided their written consent. Second, as part of informed consent, both verbally and in writing, the research team sought to be clear on the limits to confidentiality should someone be at risk of significant harm. A key contact was available within local World Vision offices that the research team could go to with any concerns; this was a familiar process to the participants and the organisation. Third, participants' personal information such as names and contact details were removed from transcripts and other data to be analysed, to assist with anonymity.

An interpreter was provided in the groups and interviews undertaken with the child participants. The researchers asked the questions in English and the interpreter then translated either each sentence into Bengali or shared the entire concept in Bengali. Six out of 9 interviews with adults were undertaken by a native speaker of Bengali, so the exchange was in Bengali. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, as agreed to by the participants. One young woman preferred not to be recorded so the interviewer took notes during the interview. All audio-recordings were first transcribed in the language of the speaker(s) and then translated into English as needed. A research assistant was fluent in both English and Bengali, which aided contextual understanding of the language and words that did not translate straightforwardly between languages. Other data (e.g. diagrammes, flipcharts) were photographed. Any written contributions were similarly transcribed and translated.

The quantitative data were analysed descriptively, providing information about the child participants and the extent of their activism. Qualitative data analysis was predominantly thematic. A coding frame was created for the qualitative data: initially, two research team members separately coded several transcripts, followed by the team members discussing and amending the coding frame (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The coding frame was further tested by cross-checking its application across samples of the data. The analysis looked across data, participant types and when respondents were connected (e.g. a girl whose marriage had been stopped and her parents), to consider whether there were common trends across these. With every research encounter asking participants to go through examples of child activism to stop someone being married, there were numerous examples to compare and contrast for the activists' processes. The methods had encouraged stories (the recounting of "protagonists, events, complications and consequences" (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.54) over time) and

we followed this with an analysis of these stories by such factors. Our synthesis (see section 4) was considerably influenced by the pictorial journeys participants created themselves and subsequent discussion where the researchers requested elaboration and exceptions.

4. Results and Discussion

The 'story' below summarises the typical process for the child activism to stop an individual from being married:

A girl is absent from the school class. One of the Child Forum members notices this, and enquires why from other students. The Child Forum member finds out that the girl's family has arranged for the girl to be married in one week's time. The Child Forum member contacts the school's head teacher. The Child Forum member contacts other Child Forum members, who meet and decide on next steps. They look online, at the official records, to find out what age is recorded for the potential girl bride. They find out that the girl is under-age.

A group of Child Forum members (generally around three, either a group of boys or a group of girls) go to the family's house, to speak to the parents. The Child Forum members speak to the parents about the dangers of child marriage for the girl and that it should not happen. The father is angry at the Child Forum members, yells at them and refuses to let the group see their school friend. The group leaves.

The group goes to the local police station and finds a police officer they know. They go with the police officer to the family's house. The police officer and the Child Forum members speak again to the father.

The father is persuaded by the arguments and particularly of the value of having the girl stay in education. The girl goes back to school and, as far as is known, stays unmarried.

All of this happens within one week.

There were derivations from this summary, such as when a marriage was not stopped or children were not able to access officials' support. Such differences are highlighted below.

Child activists reported stopping 72 child marriages as a result of these combined actions. Our analysis identified three elements as essential for such children's activism to be successful. These are discussed below.

4.1 'In the shadow of the law'

The first element was the essential role of the 'shadow of the law'. This is a very familiar concept in socio-legal studies, where the phrase 'in the shadow of the law' describes how law can impact on decision-making, even though no case goes to court. Mnookin and Kornhauser put forward this concept in their seminal 1979 paper on divorce negotiations, in the United States of America. While few divorce cases ever reached the courtroom, they show how law and legal systems still impact on the negotiations as the divorcing couples and associated professionals were aware that ultimately the court *could* decide. Thus law can have importance on local norms and social conventions even if the ultimate appeal to judicial decisions were not made in any particular case.

The 'shadow of the law' was highly influential for children's successful activism: children were able to appeal to child's marriage illegality⁷. Child activists in the focus groups consistently described that mobilising the local police and the local UNO was key to stopping the marriages. A fulsome example of this was given by a Child Forum member:

The police and the UNO tried to convince the parents to stop this marriage, but the family was not in a mood to listen to them. Then the police threatened them that, if they do not listen to them, then they would be arrested. The family came to terms at that time and realized their mistake. They stopped the marriage. (Focus Group 2)

In this example, the police and UNO needed to go further than persuasive arguments; the police needed to threaten to apply the law, in order to stop the marriage. The police did not apply the law, in the example given above, nor were there any examples provided during the research where someone was arrested or a case taken to court. Thus the 'shadow' of the law was typically enough.

The importance of engaging the legal enforcers became even clearer, when children described examples where they were *not* successful. A Child Forum member in Focus Group 3 explained why a particular child marriage was not stopped:

⁷ To note that no participant used the phrase 'shadow of the law' within the fieldwork; rather, this is a concept the authors have found useful to understand the data.

Once we went to a family. The family members were present there with some influential people. Since we were children they did not allow us to do the work ... That is why we [then] met with the mayor of our area. They have given us some privileges now. Now police officers help us and we bring police people when we require it.

This is a typical explanation, across the child activists. If they did not physically have the police or an UNO present, when they visited the parents, they were not successful in terms of stopping the child marriage. The physical embodiment, as well as the adult's verbal contribution to 'convince' parents, were required of the legal enforcers. Thus the children consistently noted the essential step of engaging the local legal enforcers, to provide literally the 'shadow' of the law, to interact directly with the parents. With this step, the shadow of the law was enough to persuade parents.

To continue with the metaphor, the 'shadow of the law' was not always long enough. When we explored with every participant when children's activism to stop child marriage was not ultimately successful and why, the answers were consistent across all participants. One UNO for example reported:

But such strange things happen sometimes that the family will tell you that they are not organizing this marriage but they later organize this secretly by taking their daughter or son to another Upazilla or district. This is very alarming!

The UNO talked about how this was done 'secretly' rather than openly. In these examples, the families were described as aware that what they were doing was illegal. There was duplicity or secretiveness, with a complementary example given by a Child Forum member in Focus Group 2:

On one occasion, when I went to a place to foil a child marriage, I was told that the marriage will not take place. The family told me they were not willing to marry their daughter off. But actually, they shifted the girl to another place and the marriage took place.

As found in both these examples, and similarly across the interviews and focus groups, the child marriage happened because it was moved to another location. The shadow of the law was sufficiently comprehensive to stop child marriages happening in that locality – but not

enough to stop the marriages taking place outside the local shadow of the law⁸. None of the children, police officers nor UNOs expressed the view that their roles could extend beyond their locality. The shadow only extended geographically so far.

The 'shadow of the law' may provide a sufficient *negative* deterrent to pause a child marriage but all Child Forum Members, other children who were potential child brides and their parents emphasised the *positive* role of education. In the paired interview with two young women, whose marriages had been stopped, both emphasised that their parents became persuaded that the future of the young women and of their families would be better if the young women continued with their education studies. The pull of education was described as decisive in persuading families not to go ahead with a child marriage. This was not due to legal requirements for school attendance but because of families valuing girls' education for their futures (see also Jensen, 2007; Mohajan, 2014).

In summary, the research demonstrates the critical role that the 'shadow of the law' played in children's activism to stop child marriage. It allowed the children to engage local legal enforcers, to represent the 'shadow of the law' with parents. Thus, while those working in the children's participation field may be demoralised when apparent legislative successes do not lead to implementation (see section 2), legal developments can have an important place. Child activists here were able to hold local officials accountable to national legislation and, by mobilising this, to have quick and direct impacts. However, the shadow of the law was only so persuasive: it did not extend beyond the locality, it needed to be represented in person by the legal enforcers to be a deterrent; and it was most successful when paired with the positive value of girls' continued education.

4.3 Relational networks

Children's activism was relational. The research identified three key relational networks for the children – networks with powerful local adults, the Child Forums supported by the World Vision local staff, and mobilising publicity through social media and journalists. The first two were essential to every example given by child activists, while the latter was identified by one group as particularly helpful for them.

The previous section discussed how local legal enforcers were key to the children stopping child marriage. Other important local people were named by the children, such as the school's headteacher, the local mayor and local religious or community leaders. These relationships, though, were not mobilised in the instance but rather developed over time. An

⁸ We did not gather enough information from research participants to identify where these later marriages took place and how far away they were geographically. Research participants' descriptions were more metaphorical, making a contrast between the local and the 'other' place.

example of this comes from Focus Group 1, where a Child Forum member proudly reported how the UNO listened to them:

While we were trying to help a girl, many people were present in the UNO's room. Maybe one MP [Member of Parliament] or somebody important was also present there. Some more people were also wanting to meet the UNO. We went there at such a time. Everyone inside the room was busy. But when the UNO saw us he invited us to talk to him.

The Child Forum members particularly noted how Child Forum members were prioritised, by the UNO, over other adults and even other important adults. The juxtaposition suggests that the children did not view this as typical behaviour but rather an atypical experience with powerful adults. Some children mentioned that they had previously met the UNO through visits set up by World Vision Bangladesh and local World Vision staff underlined that this was an explicit strategy of using their own contacts with local community leaders so as to scaffold the Child Forum members to have positive relations directly with these leaders. Thus children's ability to mobilise these key local leaders did not solely come from children's own initiative; supportive adults were working in the background so children could activate these relations when they needed to. This resonates with findings across the participation literature, where adult facilitators and organisations connect children's interests with those with power and influence – leading to successful influence on decisions (e.g. Houghton, 2018; Le Borgne, 2016; Wyness, 2013).

The Child Forum was another key network for the child activism. When describing how they had stopped child marriages, and then further when the groups collectively mapped out the process on large flip chart papers, the Child Forum members typically reached out to their Forums more widely to discuss and plan action. A typical example of this is provided early on in Focus Group 3 by a Child Forum member:

There is a good understanding among us – and we have power. Whenever an issue comes up we sit together and keep contact with each other. We discuss and debate over issues before making any final decision.

Another Child Forum member added slightly later in the focus group, about how emotional connections had increased over time: "Over the years we have developed such a bond among ourselves that I cannot live without them. I cannot leave them even if I want to. This is a bond development between us." Similarly, a Child Forum member in the same focus group likened their Forum members to siblings, indicating a close emotional bond and one with ongoing

continuity, such as within families. The strong network provided by the Forum then helped the children to organise and carry out their activism. Their activism drew on their Child Forum networks: it was not typically individual action but rather done in small groups.

The Child Forum was also a critical relational network in three more ways. In its inception, the research implicitly separated out the child activists from the children who were to be married. The fieldwork showed these two groups were not so separate. First, many of the examples given by Child Forum members were of other Child Forum members who had been at risk of being married. These potential brides informed their other Child Forum members, who then engineered the process as described in section 4. The potential brides were thus active on their own behalf, reaching out to their networks to help them achieve their own goals. Second, there were also five girls who self-reported (we did not ask children to reveal this within the focus groups but some volunteered) that they had been at risk of being married, their friends had intervened, and this had led them to join the Child Forum in order to help stop other child marriages. Third, as the Child Forums' activism continued and became more known, other children would approach Child Forum members to tell them of an impending marriage (either on their own behalf or of others). The Child Forum provided a nexus for the child activism.

Focus Group 1 had particular interactions with journalists, who had supported and publicised their activism. This was not described by the other groups in the research, although there are other examples that can be found in the Bangladeshi press. This group had recruited the journalist to report on some of their actions, with the power of journalistic public reporting another means to stop the child marriage. Given the parents' recognition, at least after the intervention, that the child marriage would be illegal, such public airing would be embarrassing itself and make open what was being kept secret.

Thus, the research found that the children's activism was more relational, and scaffolded by adults and organisations, than the research team had initially expected. On reflection, such findings are in line with children and young people's participation more generally (see Mannion, 2007; Ergler, 2017) and adults' social activism (Simon, 2010). In this research, children were able to be activists to address an immediate situation, because they had longer-term and consistent support locally. These relational networks were essential to these children's success at stopping child marriages.

4.3 Children travelling, transmitting and connecting

As reviewed in section 2, while we choose the term 'children's activism' as a provocation to ourselves and the children's participation field before undertaking the research,

the fieldwork data show how the children literally were active. They were physically active, in moving quickly from one site to another, from school, to the police office or UNO's office, to the family's home. They were the ones generating this activity, mobilising the police and the local UNO on the journey to the family home.

The children were also active in transmitting information, making information travel, in their work to convince parents and others. Child activists reported frequently taking the initiative to locate and share information on a girl's age, to stop a marriage. For example, a parent would assert that their daughter was old enough to be married but the children were confident that the girl was not. The child activists became adept at locating the girl's birth certificate through administrative channels and checking its accuracy. The legal enforcers did not investigate on their own instigation. The child activists were both skilled and tenacious about following the administrative trails, locating the information and bringing it to the attention of powerful adults.

All this activity was not slow activity. Timeframes were short, from when a child activist found out about a proposed child marriage and the proposed marriage date. Given the illegal nature of the marriage, official data on this timing were not available. We asked during every fieldwork activity and the longest we were told about was one month, the average was described as one week, and some were two days. The children were thus acting fast, with a time urgency to mobilise the necessary people and locate the necessary age information. In a short amount of time, children's activity was intensive and considerable.

5. Conclusions

We came to research these examples of child activism because their participation seemed unusual. As reported by NGOs, journalists and otherwise in social media, these were children who were organising themselves to intervene in other families, to stop marriages that would otherwise happen – and in these immediate instances they were more successful at stopping marriages than the adults who were tasked to do so. Given that other forms of children's participation risk being overly controlled by adults and lacking impact, these examples potentially provide both practical and conceptual lessons for children's participation more generally.

The analysis underlines, at least for these examples, contextual and relational factors that were critical for these children's activism. The legal framework was important: at the time of the research, girls under the age of 18 and boys under the age of 21 could not be legally married and there were local officials who were tasked with enforcing this. The children used these resources very deliberately, mobilising these local officials to accompany them in their actions, to provide the 'shadow of the law' literally and figuratively. Thus, while this research

cannot answer what would have happened if the law or the accompanying campaigns were not in place, it can point to the power of having law and officers locally charged with implementing it, to support children's activism. The activism was scaffolded in many ways, with the children coming together, being informed about child marriage, through World Vision Bangladesh's support of local Child Forums. Further, World Vision Bangladesh had an explicit strategy of sharing their own political capital with local community leaders with the children, so that in due course the child activists were able to tap into this in the immediacy of their actions and the local leaders would respond (see Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017 for similar findings). Both the law and such relationships combined to be key for the child activism to be successful.

Potentially, child activism extracts itself from the perennial undermining of children's participation by queries about their representativeness (see section 2). First, the child activists in this research might have been on the 'vanguard' of addressing child marriage but they were not the elite in terms of socio-economic advantage of such concern in the participation literature (see section 2); rather, these child activists were of their communities, frequently mobilised by friends, and several girl activists had nearly been married themselves. Second, while they well might have been statistically representative of their peers, their objective was not to 'represent' other children's views; their objective was to *act* to stop a particular child's marriage. Child activism can arise from self-protection and peer mobilisation.

It is the children's urgent activity, both physically and virtually, that is the most notable characteristic of the children's activism. All participants described this activity as being predominantly decided by the child activists, when the children heard about a potential child marriage. From all participants' perspectives, adult and child, the local leaders were not similarly active: leaders needed to be mobilised by the children, they awaited the proof that a child was below the age of 18 rather than undertaking similar investigations themselves. The children took the initiative, in a very short period of time, to bring in the 'shadow of the law' and the associated personnel and arguments, so as to stop particular child marriages.

The research findings have lessons for children's participation more widely. While legislation does not always ensure implementation nor enforcement, it can be a powerful tool for children's activism. Thus children's human rights activities need to continue with improving the law and its implementation as much as they support local participation activities. The efforts to ensure that children know their rights and know their legal contexts can be productive to support children's activism. Even the most seemingly independent of children's activism relies on some relational resources: the stronger and more long standing the resources are, the more likely they are to support ongoing activism. These children were able to find the time and space to be activists. If adults want to take children's participation rights seriously, the immediacy of children's mobilisation and actions needs to be supported rather than dismissed

or penalised. This is a challenge for adults and adult systems, with the ever-expanding emphasis on schooling and fears about children's access to social media and public spaces (Gill, 2008; Pyyry and Tani, 2016). To truly recognise children's human rights to participation, they must be able to claim the spaces and times in order to exercise them.

Acknowledgements

To be added following review. **

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